

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Sutton, Jon and Defeyter, Greta (2021) I'm one of them. *The Psychologist*, 34 (7/8). pp. 38-42. ISSN 0952-8229

Published by: British Psychological Society

URL: <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-34/summer...>  
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# 'I'm one of them'

Our editor Jon Sutton meets Professor Greta Defeyter, Director of Healthy Living, a research lab at Northumbria University

**Given your area of work – childhood food insecurity – I'm guessing you're busy at the moment...**

To give you an idea, in my inbox, I've got over 4500 emails. I have emails from organisations, companies, associations, the public, editors, academics, MPs, and civil servants. I've always struggled with time management and organisation... skills not helped by my ADHD. And emotionally, I sometimes find my research a heavy burden to shoulder, especially when the findings of our research studies may influence decisions that could be life-changing for families and children. Sometimes I wake up at three o'clock in the morning thinking about our research on child food insecurity and holiday hunger and think, am I sure? What's the evidence? Double checking everything.

**More so than if your findings were staying within academia?**

First and foremost, I am an academic, not a policy decision maker. However, I feel a responsibility to ensure that I am presenting the research findings in a clear and easy to understand way.

Writing academic papers is something that all researchers are all trained to do, and that skill develops over several years. But when you are invited to present research evidence to policy papers/makers, Select Committees, Parliamentary Inquiry's, Government Departments it is totally different, it requires a different level of expertise, skills and knowledge set, which I've had to learn quickly over the last few years. I also think it is important for people to know the limits of their expertise and the role they play in providing research evidence to the wider society.

**Do you think anyone would feel that emotional burden in the same way?**

Perhaps, it is hard to know. I think I feel it in particular, because I've been there. I've been truly hungry. When I first came back to the UK, in 1993, after living in the USA, I returned to university to study an undergraduate degree in psychology at the University of Essex. I was lucky that I received a LEA grant and had excellent friends and lecturers who supported me, but I still really struggled.

Following graduation, I was awarded an ESRC PhD studentship at the University of Essex. Again, fellow PhD students and lecturers supported me, and I have remembered and valued the support they freely offered every day since. However, despite their support,

my household income was low and being a single mum of a child that had ADHD, finding time to study was really hard. Although adorable, he was almost impossible to put with a childminder... no-one would take him. I remember one Christmas I served turkey and pineapple chunks, because I'd waited to get the reduced food at Tesco's, and that's all they had left. So yes, I've been there.

Of course, social policies change, and I am not comparing my experience to the experiences of families living in poverty in 2021.

**At the time, did it feel like being hungry was about more than just an empty belly? Did you feel the effects of hunger that you've gone on to look at?**

I felt the effects of poverty. I felt the effects of feeling worthless. I felt ashamed... it was devastating to me. I was a single parent of a child who had been diagnosed as having ADHD and I had come back to a country where I hadn't lived for over a decade. And I struggled. I was lucky that, through the grant, I was able to access an undergraduate programme of study, and then continue my studies through receiving a grant from the ESRC to undertake a PhD. Through education, I hoped to end up doing something worthwhile for the discipline and achieve positive outcomes for both myself and my son. I was one of the lucky ones... I could have easily been somebody sitting on Universal Credit right now.

**That set you on your research path, right?**

Yes and no. Initially, I didn't research food security. My work focused on investigating how children understood the function of objects. I then started to research children's understanding of object ownership – blue sky stuff. However, after starting a lectureship position at the University of Northumbria, I supervised a PhD student who was interested in the effects of breakfast cereal on children's cognition. It was during data collection at a school that I saw a child at a school breakfast club, stuffing toast into his pockets. It brought back all of the memories – 'that could have been my child'.

I asked the headteacher what school breakfast clubs were, and she looked at me as though I had flown in from outer space. 'It's where we provide breakfast to pupils before they start their school day... if we don't, they're likely to come in hungry'. I just stood there looking at this little boy: there was toast in his



backpack, there was toast just about everywhere. The headteacher came with me, reassured him there wasn't a problem, and I asked him, 'why are you doing that?' And he said, 'I'm taking it home for my tea'. Just that one child saying that one thing, and seeing it with my own eyes... I said, I'm going to research this.

Did your PhD student go into studying that area because they were looking at the impact of say, skipping breakfast out of choice, when you didn't need to skip breakfast? So that whole research area wasn't about food poverty? That's only just occurred to me... isn't that weird?

Not at all. She was conducting a number of quasi-experimental studies in which she manipulated breakfast consumption and subsequently tested children on a cognitive test battery to examine the effect of breakfast consumption on different cognitive processes. So no, we didn't really consider food poverty at the time... the research was grounded in the fields of nutrition/cognitive psychology. It was only when I saw this little boy with the toast, I thought 'there's something not right here'.

This gave me the impetus to develop a programme of research with the primary objective to investigate the effects of school breakfast clubs in the UK on children's health, social development, and educational outcomes. My lab has published several studies that have examined both the effects of breakfast consumption and the effects of school breakfast club

attendance on a variety of outcomes. I was fortunate to supervise two excellent PhD students who conducted extensive research on school breakfast clubs.

Maybe that shows how normalised it has become in the last few years, that children go hungry. I just assumed that people always knew that, and that was always an area of concern for psychologists.

There is evidence that children have experienced food insecurity for many years. To illustrate, the first report of holiday hunger – children going hungry across the school holidays – was in Parliament over 100 years ago. So, parliamentarians and researchers have known about childhood food insecurity and the effects on other household members (e.g. parents skipping meals), but it has not been until

recent years that this issue has been brought to the attention of the wider public; especially following the high profile media campaign by Marcus Rashford.

The UK is a relatively rich country, yet we have the highest level of childhood food insecurity in Europe. However, many people consider poverty to be an individual problem – of individual parents and some have labelled parents as 'unfit' or 'underserving'. Some politicians have even suggested that food insecurity is not the problem, rather the problem is one of demand. In short, holiday clubs, like food banks, create an infinite demand. As I have listened to debates in the House of Commons, myself and colleagues are often shocked to hear arguments put back and forth that

"Just that one child saying that one thing, and seeing it with my own eyes...I said, I'm going to research this"

there is no real problem. There is plenty of evidence that shows poverty is a real problem in the UK, and that changes in social policy have significant, positive or negative impacts for those living in poverty. For example, recent reforms to the benefit system, including Universal Credit, the bedroom tax, the two-child benefit cap have negatively impacted many people who are already the poorest in our society.

**Although your research began with the impact of school breakfast clubs on children's cognition, social relationships and the like, recently you've expanded to investigate the level of food security in children when they're not in school?**

Yes. When in school, the majority of the UK's poorest children qualify for free school meals and often attend school breakfast clubs, although some children living in poverty do not qualify for free school meals and there are differences in terms of the eligibility threshold across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Despite differences across countries, it quickly became apparent that, during the school holidays, many UK families experienced a range of issues, including food insecurity (holiday hunger), lack of access to affordable childcare, lack of activities for children and young people, increased financial hardship etc. In parallel, local authorities have experienced cuts to their financial budgets resulting in several cuts to services, including closures of Sure Start Centres, libraries, youth and community centres etc.

I remember a few years ago whilst I was in London, I was talking to a member of the London Youth Board, a young person, probably about 13 years old.

## 'I've learned so much from my colleagues'

### **Tell me more about the applied, multi-disciplinary approach.**

There are academics that want to do focus solely on blue sky, psychological research and there are other psychologists interested in conducting more applied research, and psychologists like myself who enjoy working in a multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary way, involving colleagues from across a range of disciplines. In my case I regularly conduct research with sociologists, nutritional scientists, educationalists, social geographers, computer scientists... I could go on and on. Personally, I think that there is value to be gained from the many different approaches.

I really enjoy being involved in multi-disciplinary projects, especially when conducting research on complex topics. My psychological training, in terms of developmental psychology, and my life experiences, initially resulted in me being interested in researching the effect of poverty on children's cognition, which in turn made me interested in children's dietary intake, and household income, unemployment etc. Goodness, I've learned so much from fellow psychologists and colleagues from other disciplines. Really interesting stuff happens when you start to understand how colleagues in other disciplines approach a topic. You start to unravel, unpick and question some of your own understandings and approaches to conducting research.



*School breakfast clubs enable children to socialise, eat a healthy breakfast, and enable parents to get to work*

I asked her, 'Why do you hang out in the fried chicken shop... do you like the food, what is it?' And she said 'we hang out there because there's nowhere else to go. It's not particularly that we want to eat the fried chicken. But it's cheap and we can sit there for a long time, it's somewhere we can all meet up'. As a result of these government cuts, the primary response to holiday hunger has been holiday clubs, often funded by charities, non-profit organisations and local government and staffed by volunteers. While such a grassroots response is admirable and has resulted in several positive outcomes for children, parents, and communities, such programmes leave the root causes of poverty and food insecurity untouched, and research by my colleague Emily Mann and others has shown issues regarding equality of access.

Our recent research findings, alongside writing a book on holiday hunger, has changed my thinking – it is apparent that food poverty is just one aspect of poverty, as is period poverty, furniture poverty etc. The solution is simple: eradicate poverty. Easier said than done.

**Within that grassroots activism as a psychologist, what do you keep bringing it back to? Do you end up focusing on the cognitive impacts of going hungry, or at the other end of the scale of living in an obesogenic environment, or...?**

I realised very quickly that how poverty affects people is far more complicated than just looking at the effect of food insecurity on children's cognition. It quickly became apparent that I needed to broaden my research collaborations and work both cross-disciplinary, but also interdisciplinary [see box]. I am currently working with sociologists, economists, dieticians, nutritional scientists, teachers, and public health experts to



look at the effects of poverty on children's cognition, educational attainment, social development, mental well-being, dietary intake, physical activity, and community networks.

**To spark genuine policy change, you're going to need that multi-pronged approach.**

Yes. I'll provide the example of school breakfast clubs. There's some excellent research out there, with many studies conducted by psychologists, that clearly shows the effect of breakfast on children and young people's cognition and educational attainment. This evidence is generally accepted by the majority of the politicians/policymakers. However, these findings alone may lead to the development or amendments to different government policies. One policy may see the government funding a national programme of school breakfast clubs. While another policy decision may lead to the provision of food vouchers for parents so that parents can provide their children breakfast at home. Note that both policies would share the aim of increasing the number of children and young people eating breakfast before school. Moreover, there could be multiple clauses and variations to these policies; providing vouchers to all children; providing vouchers to children in receipt of free school meals; providing vouchers to primary school aged children only etc. Hence the same research findings may lead to markedly different policies and result in different outcomes for children and young people. When I am presenting evidence to policymakers, I always remind myself that it is important to be aware of different political approaches and potential policy outcomes. However, as I've said, I am not a policy maker... I always try to provide as full an account of the research findings in my area of expertise as possible.

**From that you would generally favour provision on school site, rather than the vouchers?**

I would not be in favour of families receiving food vouchers to be able to provide breakfast for their children. In my opinion, as a society, we shouldn't be in a position where some parents are having to send their children to a school breakfast club because they cannot afford to provide breakfast at home.

Having said this, a number of research studies have shown that school breakfast clubs have additional benefits to simply providing food – one of the obvious ones being childcare. We've got a growing population of the so-called 'working poor' and many parents struggle to meet the costs of childcare. Breakfast clubs provide an opportunity for parents to drop their children off at school prior to the start of the school day, enabling children to socialise, eat a healthy breakfast, and enabling parents to get to work. So, it's not just about food security, it's about financial

hardship, it's about housing, it's about childcare, it's about communities, it's about poverty. It's about the type of society we all want to live in.

**Are there different issues at stake psychologically around holiday provision compared to breakfast?**

I think that the psychological issues around holiday provision and school breakfast clubs are similar.

The holiday hunger research that my lab has been conducting for the last seven years has really started to shape policy in a big way. Our research has shown that holiday provision reduces parental stress, reduces food insecurity, increases children's physical activity, improves children's dietary intake and mental well-being, similar to our research on school breakfast clubs.

However, there's an argument that holiday programmes and school breakfast clubs don't tackle the root cause of poverty. On the one hand, I agree that such interventions directly prop up lack of government investment in the welfare state. From a pragmatic point of view, if we can have both investment in the welfare state, and investment in communities that provide opportunities for children to engage in activities within their community, then let's have both.

I think that we need to rethink how we look at our whole society – to make sure people have dignity, choice, and autonomy – to eradicate poverty. But I can't see a radical change occurring, typically such changes are complex, and it is worthwhile bearing in mind that people have different points of view. In terms of 'levelling up society' I would like to see improvements across many areas, including our social security system, widespread adoption of the living wage, a strategic approach to investment in school meals, investment in so called 'left behind' communities. But mainly investment in people and the communities in which they live, shaped by residents of the community. Goodness knows, post Covid-19, a great number of families, individuals, and communities will need lots of support.

**Are you increasingly feeling listened to? If not 'Marcus Rashford level' listened to, do you feel that psychology has got a prominent seat at the table on this issue?**

Yes. I have advised the DfE on their Holiday Activity and Food Programme, that has resulted in an investment of £220 million, for 2021, across England. This programme will provide a range of activities, day trips, and food for some of the poorest children in England. Our research has also informed the Food Foundation, working with more than 20 other civil society organisations, that supported the End Child Poverty campaign led by Marcus Rashford to implement the three recommendations on children's food in the National Food Strategy between September

"It's not just about food security...it's about the type of society we all want to live in"

and November 2020. The fact that Marcus Rashford spoke out about child food insecurity is fantastic. His campaign certainly attracted the attention of the government.

That kind of work has seen you named as one of The Big Issue's top 100 changemakers for 2020. You're a Fellow of the BPS, and so much more. Yours is a personal story of moving from poverty to flourishing. Sometimes I find myself on the same day, working with co-designing an intervention with some of the most deprived members of our community, and an hour later, I can be sitting in a Westminster meeting or giving evidence at a Select Committee in the House of Lords. I still feel like the interloper sometimes. I see and experience the two worlds... I move from one to the other. That can be humbling.

In fact the best recognition of my research comes from the feedback I hear from parents and children attending school breakfast clubs and the Holiday Activity and Food programmes. A parent, now a friend, once said to me 'Greta, you understand, you're just like us'. I'm one of them. Even today that brings tears to my eyes. I remember the house I lived in when I was studying at the University of Essex. It was a two up two down, in a deprived neighbourhood. My son always went to school in second-hand uniforms, he qualified for means tested free school meals, we experienced racism... I now think of my son pursuing a career in teaching history at a secondary school in London, of the house I currently live in – still in a deprived town – and how lucky I have been to pursue a career that really interests me.

I think this is important. Psychologists, we're a mixed bunch. People will have taken different routes to studying psychology, shaped by their current and past experiences and opportunities. We're all different, and I'm no exception.

When you think of the Society priority, 'from poverty to flourishing', what does 'flourishing' mean to you in this context? The basics, no child should go hungry?

I set my sights higher than that. I would argue that we have to look at poverty in its entirety. Food poverty, period poverty, digital poverty... Just giving people the basics to survive will not provide families or households with opportunities to flourish, it may provide them with the basics not to be living in poverty, but more is required to flourish. That's not the kind of society I want to see. In my opinion, we need to consider how to provide equitable, and free, access to education. It's not that one type of education is better than another type of education – degree apprenticeships versus university degrees – every individual should have the right to choose which route they wish to follow; it shouldn't be dictated by a lack of income or fear of taking out a loan to study. I see education, just like the right to food, as a human right.

We have to have serious debates about some of the existing inequalities in society and think about how everyone can have the opportunity to flourish, achieve and be self-fulfilled.

**What would you say to people who argue that ensuring the financial security of families and the general economic structure of our country is 'political', and not our place as psychologists?**

I don't think it's my role to do it. That's the government's role. As I have said previously, I am academic, not a policy decision maker. However, if I'm conducting research that can inform the government about interventions or policies, then I think that I have a moral duty to share the research findings.

Obviously, there's an interplay between the evidence and the political agenda. I think a good example of this interplay can be seen in the work of SAGE. They're not advising the government on the economy or making the political decisions concerning Covid-19. They're advising the government regarding the data on public health. Of course, the secrecy around the science and the worries over the government strategy motivated Sir David King to set up the Independent Sage.

So, I am going to follow the above examples and speak up. Whether the government actually follows the science is another matter. I believe that psychologists, such as Professor Susan Michie, have much to offer.

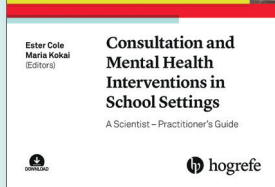
**Maybe you feel that particularly because of your life course.**

I'm sure that my past experiences have shaped my thinking. I have experienced what it's like to have no money left on the electricity meter. I have experienced what it is like to ask friends and family for money to enable me to send my son on a school trip. I understand exactly what it's like to buy a second-hand toy from Barnardos, wipe it with bleach and wrap it up as though it was new for my child's Christmas present. I've been there, I have experienced it and that experience will never leave me. And I don't think it should. In the 'flourishing' I have never forgotten where I came from.



*Professor Defeyter is due to appear for 'The Psychologist Presents...' at Latitude Festival in Suffolk from 22-25 July.*  
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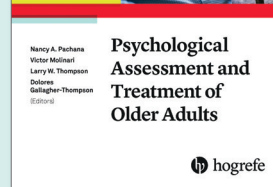
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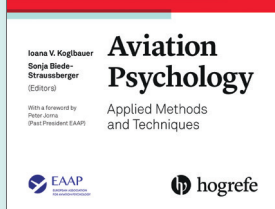


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